

One Table, Two Names

Proper 19A — International Day & Homecoming

Genesis 50:15-21 · Psalm 103:(1-7), 8-13 · Romans 14:1-12 · Matthew 18:21-35

A couple weeks ago, I was in the parish hall. Coffee Hour.
 A couple of folks had to-go boxes...
 holding the very same food. Except it wasn't...
 Because when they started talking, they realized
 their two islands had completely different names for it.
 Same thing, near enough to look identical on the plate,
 and two entirely different words,
 two different sets of memories attached,
 two grandmothers who would had very different ideas
 about how to make it.

Two people who looked like they could be related...
 Same corner of the world, same warm ocean,
 same food on the plate. And yet... underneath the similarity two
 cultures grown up in different directions, different words,
 different histories, different griefs, descended,
 if you go back far enough,
 from different parts of the earth entirely.
 So close on the surface.
 So distinct underneath. And I thought:
That... is every one of us.

Each of us is wound together
 out of threads that run further back than we can trace
 a unique cord of creation... no two alike...
 spun from places and peoples and choices we never made
 and mostly can't even name.
 Look around at all these flags.

Every one is a thread.
And behind every flag are a hundred smaller threads
the village, the language, the recipe, the wound, the crossing —
that make the person carrying it
exactly who they are... and no one else.
We are so *unlike* each other.
Genuinely, deeply, all-the-way-down *unlike* each other.
And at the very same time, *we are all human*.
Every last one of us.
That is the strange double truth this day puts on display:
we could not be more different
and we could not be more the same.
Two names for the one dish.
Many flags, one Table.

Those differences *are not free*.
When people formed *that* differently
socially, economically, politically, religiously,
right down in the marrow
are set next to each other...
in a family, a marriage, a congregation, a country,
sometimes... it does not go well.
Threads that should have been woven together
get cut instead.
And the cutting leaves a mark.

I'm not saying anything new.
Nearly everyone in this room
carries at least one relationship
that was never reconciled.
A parent you never made peace with.
A sibling you stopped speaking to.
A whole branch of the family that split off
before you were old enough to understand why
so you grew up with names or faces
you were never allowed to know.
Someone you were supposed to belong to...
and somehow... didn't.

And here is the cruelest part.
For a great many of those relationships, it's now too late.
The person died before the phone call... before the letter...
before the first awkward move
that might have started to fix it.
So you are left holding a wound
that nothing you do can heal
because the other half of it is in the grave.
You will never hear their side.
You will never know their story.
There is a hole in the soul,
and no amount of effort on your part can fill it,
because filling it... was *never* something you could do alone.

The ache... is real.
And any preacher who says forgiveness is easy
never had to forgive anyone who mattered.

So let's turn to Joseph...
And be careful how we read him,
because people have bad habits with this story.
We treat it like a fairy tale... the coat of many colors...
the boy sold into slavery who rises to rule Egypt
and saves his family in the end.
A story... that could never actually happen to people like us.

We admire it from a safe distance
and would never be so foolish
to expect our own broken families to end that way.

But look again at the passage.
It is not a fairy-tale scene.
It is one of the most painfully human moments in Scripture.

Their father Jacob is dead
and the moment he's in the ground
Joseph's brothers are gripped by terror
the only thing holding Joseph's revenge in check...
They assume... was their father's presence.
So they invent a message:

***"Your father gave this command before he died:
forgive your brothers."***

They can't even come to Joseph *honestly*.
They're *so certain* of his *hatred*
they *hide* behind a *dead man's words* to *beg for their lives*.

These are grown men. Decades have passed.
 Yet in their own minds
 they're still standing at the edge of that pit
 still the men who stripped their brother... sold him...
 and lied to their father's face for twenty years.

The wound never closed for them either.
 That is what unreconciled damage does.
 It does not age out.
 It sits inside a person for the rest of their life.

And Joseph weeps.
Not because he's deciding whether to forgive.
 He weeps because he decided to forgive... long ago
 And it grieves him that they still don't believe it.

"Do not be afraid.
 "Am I in the place of God?
 You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."

Now hear what he's *not* saying.
 He is *not* saying it didn't *hurt*
 that the pit was fine
 that the years torn away from his father is no great loss.
 He does not rewrite the harm into something pleasant.
 The evil was evil...and he names it as evil *to their faces*.
 What he *is* saying... Evil was *not* the last word...
 Throughout the wreckage of his family
 God was quietly at work... bringing life out of it...
 not by erasing the wound...
 but by refusing... to let it be... the *end of the story*.

That's why this story *held people* for three thousand years...
 Not because it's a charming tale...
 But because every generation...
 Sat where you're sitting...
 Carrying a wound... *they thought* would never heal.

What if the reason...
We can't imagine our own Joseph ending
is that we keep trying to do it without God in the middle?

We calculate the odds
 the person is stubborn, or distant, or dead
 and conclude reconciliation is off the table.

By our own arithmetic, we're right.
 But Joseph's whole point...
is that the arithmetic changes when God is party to it.
"Am I in the place of God?"

Reconciliation was never something Joseph manufactured.
 It was something *God had been building...*
 out of the raw material of a broken family... for years...
 while everyone *assumed the story was over.*

The psalm tells us why *we dare to hope* such a thing.

*“The Lord is full of compassion and mercy,
slow to anger and of great kindness.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.
As far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our sins from us.”*

That is not a God who keeps the ledger we keep.
We are the ones who remember... to the penny...
exactly what we are owed... and what was done to us...

But God does not keep that book.
He takes the whole debt and removes it
as far as the sunrise is from the sunset.

Think about that distance for a moment.
East and west never meet.
You could travel toward the horizon your whole life
and never close the gap.
That is how far God has already carried our sin away from us.

And if that is *what God does* with *our debt*
It is the only honest model we have
for what to do with one another's.

Which is what Jesus is getting at with Peter.

“How many times shall I forgive — seven?”

And Jesus says... in effect... *stop counting*.

Seventy times seven... not a bigger number...
the death of the number.

Then the parable:

*A servant forgiven a debt no working life could ever repay
walks straight out to throttle a man who owes him loose change.*

We wince... because *we know him*
Quick to remember the loose change others owe us
Slow to remember *the unpayable debt... cancelled...*
for us on a cross.

The forgiveness we owe one another is ***not*** *spare generosity*.
It is passing along what we’ve already been given.

And Paul...

writing to a church... every bit as mixed as this one...
all of them... judging each other... across their differences...
Refuses to Referee.

***“Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?
We shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.”***

The person whose plate looks strange to you...
 whose whole cord of creation ran different from yours...
God has already welcomed them.

The Table *was never* ours ***to guard.***
 It has *always* been the Lord's...
 and he set *far more places at it... than we would have.*

So on this ***Homecoming Sunday***
 in a Sanctuary... full of flags.

***A homecoming is not a gathering of people
 who turned out to be the same after all.***

Joseph's brothers never stopped being the men who sold him.

The church in Rome never all agreed about the food.

*We are not going to blend... this side of heaven...
 into one culture wearing everyone else's clothes.*

A real homecoming is what happens...
 when people with genuine reasons to stay divided...
Sit down at one Table... anyway...
 because ***Someone*** with *far greater reason*
 to hold every one of us at arm's length
 chose instead to draw us in.

I like to speak directly... to those of you...
Carrying someone you can no longer reach.
Someone gone.
A reconciliation... that by every human measure...
is simply closed.

Hear me carefully...
because this is the whole reason we are here.

That ache you have been carrying
the one you walked in with this morning
the one you were sure was just a permanent hole
that ache... *is not the absence of God.*

It is *the fingerprint of God.*
It is the very place...
He has been at work in you...
All along the way

He was at work in Joseph in a foreign country
for all those silent years,
when it looked to everyone...
like nothing was happening at all.

*Because here is what Joseph knew
and what the empty tomb shouts even louder:*
God is not finished.

Not with the dead... and not with you.
*The longing you feel... to be made whole...
with someone you've lost*
God planted that longing

and God *does not plant* a hunger...
He has no intention of feeding.

If you are aching for reconciliation
it is because God has already begun it in you.
You are not standing at the locked door anymore.
You are standing *on the far side of it*
in the early morning light...
only just beginning to realize...
the stone has been rolled away.

So do not brace for disappointment.
Expect the extraordinary.
This is exactly how God moves
through the wound... not around it.
through the grave... not away from it.

*That hole in your soul that you could never fill on your own...
God is filling it.*

He has done His most astonishing work
in harder ground than yours
and He is not about to stop now.

So when someone hands you a plate
of something you've never tasted
from an island whose name you'd have to ask twice
take it.

Ask them what they call it.
Let them tell you it's the same as what the next table
calls something else entirely.
And in that small, delicious, human exchange
two names, one dish, two cords of creation, one Table

*Catch a glimpse... of what God is doing...
with **the whole torn, scattered, beloved family of humankind.***

*God means it... **for good.***

All of it.

Every flag.

Every name.

Every single one of us.

Amen.